

A Journal Reflection on the World Airways Trip to Vietnam
by
Lana Noone

June 12:

San Francisco...A lovely reception and dinner at the Sheraton Hotel.

I'm overwhelmed to see so many of the "threads" of the Vietnam Babylift together in one room...Babylift adoptees and families, World Airways crew . . .

I finally get the chance to meet Cheryl Markson...who made the decision to place Jennie with us after Heather died.

I still feel as if I'm dreaming...still can't believe we're on our way to Vietnam tomorrow morning.

June 13:

We're on the bus to Oakland Airport where we're leaving from our own hangar...extraordinary terminal...very emotional news conference.

There it is...the plane that will take us to Vietnam. It's real, and Jen and I are boarding it while cameras film our every move.

June 14:

We lose a day...land in Taipei and most of us are too tired to attend the dinner...just want to sleep, as we need to put our suitcases out at 5 am tomorrow morning for the trip to Vietnam.

June 15:

The pilot just announced that we're in Vietnam airspace.

Vietnam appears through the cloud as if by magic...not really a "place" to me, but a journey through time, back to 1975, when my husband Byron and I were young...so much promise to life...buying a house, adopting a baby.

It looks so peaceful from the plane...was there really a war here?

Did over 58,000 Americans die here?...did the C5A crash here?

I wonder...Why did Heather have to die?

Why isn't Byron here with me?... not sure I can cope with this alone.

The clouds seem to be "announcing" us...parting for our plane to make its descent.

As usual, I'm "talking" to Byron about this...want to share it with him, and let him know that I'm amazed to be here.

I'm praying for all those who died in Vietnam...on all sides in both countries.

I pray that they're all at peace, and that they know they're not forgotten.

Best regards,
Lana.

Brigadoon", the musical, keeps running through my mind.

It's a mythical land that only appears in the Scottish mists once every hundred years.

Vietnam has always seemed part myth to me, just like Brigadoon.

It's always seemed so far away, and yet, I watched the War on TV every night during the War years. During those years Vietnam was a frightening place to venture.

I recall that when Jennie first arrived, the INS came to our home to take her footprints. They planned to send them to Vietnam so that the birth parents could "find" their children. I remember the very kind INS agent, who's gun showed when he removed his suit jacket. We were so afraid of losing Jennie.

Now, 30 years later...we're about to land in Vietnam, on our own chartered first-class airplane...with the crew of the first Babylift plane on board.

I wonder how they're feeling right now.

When the pilot told us we were in Vietnam air space everyone cheered, but now, the plane is suddenly quiet. We all have our own thoughts, fears, desires about this trip and the weight of that silence is deafening.

As we descend, there are 35 to 40 photojournalists awaiting our arrival on the tarmac. At first, I thought they were there for some visiting dignitaries or celebrities, but Jen said, "No mom...they're there for us". The adoptees will hold a news conference, and the rest of us will meet them at the hotel.

Tan Son Nhut Airport is unspectacular...quiet. We don't see anyone except our group at the airport, but when we go outside there are hundreds of people waiting for us. We all wonder who they are...later discover that our trip was broadcast on Vietnamese TV and the entire country has been "following" us from Taiwan! We get on our buses and drive into Saigon. No one seems to call it HCMC.

The countryside is bleak...debris everywhere...is it from the War? And Saigon...a mixture of grinding poverty, shack-like "stores" and...can it be real...Prada and Bulgari boutiques across from our Hotel.

It's a land of contrasts with everyone wanting to come to America...wanting American dollars...American technology. My brain feels like it's on overload...wonder if anyone else feels this way.

I've planned a memorial service for Heather and Byron while we're in Vietnam, and I've just located a beautiful flower and flag area outside our hotel. That will be a lovely location for the ceremony. Byron always loved gardening and loved flying the flag on every holiday...believe this area will be perfect. Our

suitcases are delayed, and the small amount of soil we've brought from their gravesites is in the suitcase, so we need to wait for them to arrive before we hold the ceremony.

I can't really enjoy anything until we have the ceremony...feeling the enormity of my promise to Heather right now.

All these years, I never really thought I'd make good on my promise to Heather to have a memorial service for her if I ever visited Vietnam.

We had waited so long to be parents, and Heather was so sick when she arrived.

We spent endless days at the hospital...and she never improved. I couldn't imagine that God would let her die...couldn't believe it was happening to her...to us.

Byron noticed that as her illness progressed, her hospital rooms kept getting changed...smaller rooms and further away from the nurse's station.

She was so tiny, and yet so courageous...through all of the medical procedures...the blood transfusions...she kept fighting to survive.

And then, she couldn't hold on anymore, and she died.

I couldn't save her...not from her illness, not from the ravages of that war.

All I can do now is bring soil from her grave back to Vietnam.

I've decided to ask the adoptees and some of the original Babylift participants to attend our memorial ceremony...will ask Jen if that's okay for her.

Jen said yes, so between the cocktail hour and the dinner, we'll have our ceremony.

As we arrive at the spot for the ceremony...I'm amazed that so many people want to share the service with us.

Jen and I both say a few words, and then we sing "Amazing Grace"...thought that everyone would know the first stanza. Then, we ask everyone who wishes, to deposit some of the soil with us.

I say a silent prayer of thanksgiving that I'm alive to do this for Heather, and also now for Byron...a little bit of their DNA will now always be in Vietnam.

I promised Heather that I wouldn't let her be forgotten, and, somehow, with this ceremony, I feel that my promise to her has been fulfilled.

June 16:

This is our 2nd and final full day in Vietnam. It began with a bus tour, and our first stop is Notre Dame Cathedral.

When Byron was undergoing chemo and radiation treatment, a friend's friend prayed for his recovery at the Cathedral. My goal is to find a rock to bring back to Byron's grave from the Cathedral grounds, and I'm successful...very happy about that.

Everywhere we go, children and adults rush up to us...beg us to purchase their goods...have never seen anything like this in my life. The children tear at my heart...try to buy something small from them.

Our next stop is Phu My Orphanage. After we present our donations to the orphanage, I look for a small rock from the grounds to bring back for Heather's grave...feel good when I find one.

The orphans "hang" onto each of us. They are all severely handicapped, and the prostheses and equipment they use are very old and outdated. This is difficult to comprehend, and I wish I could donate more than I have already given to them.

At one point, a Vietnamese journalist asks me to speak with an elderly man who has walked a great distance to the orphanage to meet our group. Through an interpreter, he tells me that he saw our group on TV. He is searching for his daughter who was sent to the US 30 years ago during Babylift. As we talk, the Vietnamese News Channel films us, and several newspaper journalists interview us. I'm told that my website address will be broadcast on TV and will also be published in the newspaper. I am very grateful for the opportunity to help...grateful to God for giving me this privilege.

In the evening we're invited to an official reception at the Unification Palace. It seems very surreal to me, as I remember the Unification Palace when the name was still the Presidential Palace. Thirty years ago the Viet Cong stormed the gates...I watched it on TV. And now... we're being welcomed through those same gates. It feels strange...as though reality has become stretched and twisted.

We leave Vietnam the next morning, and as we take off, one of the adoptees, who was on the Dali flight 30 years ago, stands up. He says, "The captain has just informed me that we have no approval for take-off, but he's going anyway". Deja vu...and everyone laughs and applauds. But, it's a bittersweet moment for me...so much personal loss in this journey to Vietnam. I've left something of Heather and something of Byron in Vietnam. I hope they're at peace, and that the souls of all who died in the War are at peace...so sorry for the losses suffered by all.

As we leave Vietnam, I say a silent prayer that peace will enter the hearts of everyone who was impacted by the Vietnam War. Vietnam will always be with me...a bit of two people I loved very much remains there.

April 2, 2005 was proclaimed "Vietnam Babylift" Day by the Governor of New Jersey.

The date is significant, as it is the 30th Anniversary of the first Babylift flight.

The proclamation reads:

State of New Jersey

Executive Department

Proclamation

WHEREAS, Operation Babylift, the search and rescue of abandoned children during the Vietnam War, has attained international acclaim as one of the most noteworthy humanitarian rescue missions of the 20th century; and

WHEREAS, in April 1975, more than 2,000 Vietnamese orphans were flown to new homes in the United States and another 1,300 children were flown to Canada, Europe, and Australia; and

WHEREAS, the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Holmdel, New Jersey has consistently been a voice in recognizing Operation Babylift; and

WHEREAS, on April 2, 2005, the Operation Babylift families, New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Vietnam Operation Babylift civilian participants and members of the United States Vietnamese community are honoring the 30th Anniversary of the Vietnam Operation Babylift;

NOW, THEREFORE, I RICHARD, J. CODEY, acting Governor of the State of New Jersey, do hereby proclaim

April 2, 2005

as

OPERATION BABYLIFT DAY

in New Jersey.

GIVEN, under my hand and the Great Seal of the State of New Jersey, this twenty-fourth day of March in the year of Our Lord two thousand five and of the Independence of the United States the two hundred and twenty-ninth.

Signed,
Richard J. Codey,
ACTING GOVERNOR,
STATE OF NEW JERSEY.

BY THE GOVERNOR:
Signed by REGENA L. THOMAS,
SECRETARY OF STATE.

Richard J. Codey

A 30th Anniversary Vietnam "Operation Babylift" painting, titled, "Heather's Homecoming-Operation Babylift" by Artist/Vietnam Veteran Bernie Duff was unveiled at the New Jersey Vietnam Era Educational Center's 30th Anniversary Vietnam Babylift Program on April 2, 2005.

It commemorates Heather Constance Noone/Mai Ngoc Tran's arrival in New York from Vietnam on April 23, 1975.

Heather (February 14, 1975-May 17, 1975) is the beloved daughter of Byron and Lana Noone, sister of Jennifer and Jason Noone, sister-in-law of Rosemary Noone and aunt of Heather Marie Song Yee Noone, her namesake.

The Noone family wishes to express their deep gratitude to Bernie Duff for this outstanding recognition of Heather's brief life.

A photo of the painting is available at:

www.Vietnambabylift.org

and please click onto the "Images" page.